

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

In vivo neuronal co-expression of mu and delta opioid receptors uncovers new therapeutic perspectives

Eric Erbs¹, Lauren Faget^{1,2}, Pierre Veinante³, Brigitte L Kieffer^{1,4}, Dominique Massotte^{1,3}

¹Dept of Neurogenetics and Translational Medicine, IGBMC, F-67404 Illkirch, France

²Present address: Dpt of Neurosciences, UCSD, CA 92093, USA

³Institut des Neurosciences Cellulaires et Intégratives, UPR 3212, F-67000 Strasbourg, France

⁴Douglas Research Centre, Dept Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine, McGill University, H4H 1R3 Montréal, Canada

Correspondence: Dominique Massotte

E-mail: d.massotte@unistra.fr

Received: July 07, 2014

Published online: September 05, 2014

Opioid receptors belong to the G protein coupled receptor family. They modulate brain function at all levels of neural integration and therefore impact on autonomous, sensory, emotional and cognitive processing. *In vivo* functional interaction between mu and delta opioid receptors are known to take place though it is still debated whether interactions occur at circuitry, cellular or molecular level. Also, the notion of receptor crosstalk via mu-delta heteromers is well documented *in vitro* but *in vivo* evidence remains scarce. To identify neurons in which receptor interactions could take place, we designed a unique double mutant knock-in mouse line that expresses functional red-fluorescent mu receptors and green-fluorescent delta receptors. We mapped mu and delta receptor distribution and co-localization throughout the nervous system and created the first interactive brain atlas with concomitant mu-delta visualization at subcellular resolution (<http://mordor.ics-mci.fr/>). Mu and delta receptors co-localize in neurons from subcortical networks but are mainly detected in separate neurons in the forebrain. Also, co-immunoprecipitation experiments indicated physical proximity in the hippocampus, a prerequisite to mu-delta heteromerization. Altogether, data suggest that mu-delta functional interactions take place at systems level for high-order emotional and cognitive processing whereas mu-delta may interact at cellular level in brain networks essential for survival, which has potential implications for innovative drug design in pain control, drug addiction and eating disorders.

To cite this article: Eric Erbs, et al. In vivo neuronal co-expression of mu and delta opioid receptors uncovers new therapeutic perspectives. Receptor Clin Invest 2014; 1: e210. doi: 10.14800/rci.210.

Copyright: © 2014 The Authors. Licensed under a *Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License* which allows users including authors of articles to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format, in addition to remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially, as long as the author and original source are properly cited or credited.

The opioid system acts as a major key player in reward and motivation but also regulates emotional responses and cognition. In addition, this neuromodulatory system impacts on nociception, and autonomic functions [1]. The three opioid receptors mu, delta and kappa are homologous G protein coupled receptors (GPCRs) [2] and both opioid receptors and endogenous opioid peptides are largely

expressed throughout the nervous system [3]. Interestingly, several decades of opioid pharmacology have brought to light the complexity of the opioid physiology, which initiated extensive studies to determine the respective involvement of mu, delta and kappa receptors in pain control, drug abuse and mood disorders [4-7]. In particular, analyzing the effects of opioid drugs *in vivo* has revealed

functional interactions mainly documented for mu and delta [8]. However, whether in vivo receptor interactions occur at circuit, cellular or molecular level remains highly debated.

Numerous reports described heteromer formation taking place in transfected cells between mu, delta and kappa opioid receptors or between one of them and a non-opioid receptor [9, 10]. As a result, physical interaction between two receptors would give rise to a novel molecular entity with specific signaling and/or trafficking properties. Such heteromers would represent the molecular determinant that underlies the integrated changes observed at system level. However, mu-delta in vivo co-expression and heteromerization remain extremely difficult to tackle with existing tools [11]. In vivo co-localization has indeed only been reported in dorsal root ganglia (DRG) [12-14], spinal cord [15] and within a limited number of brain areas [16-18] but, as for most GPCRs, we still miss in-depth anatomical mapping of opioid receptors in the brain that also provides subcellular resolution.

We recently addressed in vivo mu-delta co-localization using a double mutant line (delta-eGFP/mu-mcherry) that expresses functional fluorescent forms of mu and delta receptors [19]. This mouse line was obtained by breeding delta-eGFP knock-in mice that express a functional delta receptor with a fused C-terminal eGFP instead of the native receptor [20] with a second knock-in mouse line that was generated according to a similar strategy and expresses a functional mu receptor with a fused C-terminal red fluorescent mcherry protein. The single mutant mice showed no detectable alteration of behavior and responses to drugs. Mu-mcherry and delta-eGFP fluorescent signals were mapped in the nervous system with subcellular resolution. We collected fluorescent images of coronal and sagittal sections to generate a virtual atlas that can be freely searched at <http://mordor.ics-mci.fr/>. In the double mutant mouse line, mu-mcherry and delta-eGFP distributions were consistent with previously published data. This designates the double fluorescent knock-in mouse as a particularly well-suited tool to map mu and delta receptor neuronal co-localization throughout the brain. In addition, co-immunoprecipitation experiments uncovered mu-delta close physical vicinity in the hippocampus and hence qualifies the use of the double knock-in animals to address the physiopathological relevance of mu-delta heteromerization in vivo.

Co-localization of mu-mcherry and delta-eGFP was observed in discrete populations of the DRGs similarly to previous reports [12-14] but also across all layers of the spinal cord in agreement with a previous study reporting physical mu-delta interaction in the spinal cord using co-immunoprecipitation experiments [15]. In the brain, mu-

delta co-expression was predominantly observed in the hippocampus, the hypothalamus, the lateral parabrachial nucleus and vestibular nuclei. Additional regions included the piriform cortex, the auditory pathway, as well as mid- and hindbrain regions involved in the control of movement and posture or relaying somatosensory or motor information to the autonomic nervous system. Surprisingly, mu-delta co-expressing neurons were extremely scarce in the forebrain. The analysis of mu-delta co-localization in the brain raised interrogations about the possible in vivo roles of neuronal co-expression. First, the low mu-delta co-expression in forebrain networks responsible for higher-order processing was unexpected and suggests that, under basal conditions, functional interactions between mu and delta take predominantly place at circuitry level as far as mood control, reward processing and cognition are concerned. Intriguingly, mu-delta neuronal co-expression is observed in the CA1 area of the hippocampus, the piriform cortex and the nucleus of the trapezoid body. These regions operate as coincidence detector for spatial, olfactory and auditory cues respectively [21-23] suggesting critical mu-delta modulation of their processing. Mu-delta neuronal co-expression in brain areas involved in motor activity also came as a surprise and expands our current knowledge of opioid physiology. Mu-delta co-localization is indeed present in brain areas where it may exert a modulatory role on mandibular movements involved in masticatory reflexes and jaw movements associated with feeding [24]. In addition, mu-delta co-localization is also detected in brain areas involved in motor responses that can be correlated to the search for food and water, the sexual attraction or the avoidance of aversive stimuli. Indeed, the physiological impact of mu-delta neuronal co-expression seems related to the modulation of both ascending somatosensory information and corresponding descending reflex responses intended to protect the individual. Neuronal co-expression of mu and delta receptors is mainly observed in subcortical networks responding to presentation of noxious or non-noxious aversive stimuli [25, 26] as well as in brainstem nuclei tightly connected with the autonomic nervous system. Neurons co-expressing mu and delta receptors are also distributed within neuronal circuits processing food intake, NaCl and water uptake or regulating sexual activity [27-29]. Mu-delta crosstalk at cellular level may therefore operate in neural circuits involved in behaviors associated with body homeostasis and sexual activities.

Neuronal co-expression in brainstem nuclei also suggests that the two receptors may functionally contribute to several pathological conditions such as drug addiction by contributing to somatic and autonomic symptoms associated with drug withdrawal. Targeting mu-delta

heteromers may therefore constitute a promising and entirely novel approach to reduce opioid withdrawal, and possibly withdrawal signs associated with other drugs of abuse [30]. On the other hand, the high level of co-localization of mu and delta in neurons in nociceptive pathways designates mu-delta heteromers as an attractive target in pain management. This view is supported by recent data indicating that mu-delta activation with a biased agonist induces less tolerance [31]. Also, neuronal co-expression of the two receptors in orexin-positive neurons of the lateral hypothalamus critically involved in both food and drug reward [32], points to mu-delta heteromers as potential target for novel strategies to treat obesity or to reduce drug-seeking behaviors.

Overall, our data suggest that mu and delta receptors may cooperate intracellularly in neural networks essential for survival. Therefore, mu-delta heteromers distributed within neural networks associated with abnormal nociception, aversive aspects of drug withdrawal or eating disorders emerge as very appealing targets for drug design.

Conflicting interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Acknowledgements

We thank our funding sources including the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, the Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale, the Université de Strasbourg, The Agence Nationale pour la Recherche (IMOP), the National Institutes of Health (NIDA DA-005010) and the Stefan and Shirley Hatos Center for Neuropharmacology. L. F. was supported by a region Alsace fellowship.

References

- Feng Y, He X, Yang Y, Chao D, Lazarus LH, Xia Y. Current research on opioid receptor function. *Curr Drug Targets* 2012; 13: 230-246.
- Filizola M, Devi LA. Grand opening of structure-guided design for novel opioids. *Trends Pharmacol Sci* 2013; 34: 6-12.
- Le Merrer J, Becker JA, Befort K, Kieffer BL. Reward processing by the opioid system in the brain. *Physiol Rev* 2009; 89: 1379-1412.
- Bruchas MR, Land BB, Chavkin C. The dynorphin/kappa opioid system as a modulator of stress-induced and pro-addictive behaviors. *Brain Res* 2010; 1314: 44-55.
- Pradhan AA, Befort K, Nozaki C, Gaveriaux-Ruff C, Kieffer BL. The delta opioid receptor: an evolving target for the treatment of brain disorders. *Trends Pharmacol Sci* 2011; 32: 581-590.
- Nadal X, La Porta C, Andreea Bura S, Maldonado R. Involvement of the opioid and cannabinoid systems in pain control: New insights from knockout studies. *Eur J Pharmacol* 2013; 716: 142-157.
- Charbogne P, Kieffer BL, Befort K. 15 years of genetic approaches in vivo for addiction research: Opioid receptor and peptide gene knockout in mouse models of drug abuse. *Neuropharmacology* 2014; 76 Pt B: 204-217.
- Cahill CM, Holdridge SV, Morinville A. Trafficking of delta-opioid receptors and other G-protein-coupled receptors: implications for pain and analgesia. *Trends Pharmacol Sci* 2007; 28: 23-31.
- Fujita W, Gomes I, Devi LA. Revolution in GPCR Signaling: Opioid receptor heteromers as novel therapeutic targets. *Br J Pharmacol* 2014; doi: 10.1111/bph.12798.
- Ong EW, Cahill CM. Molecular Perspectives for mu/delta Opioid Receptor Heteromers as Distinct, Functional Receptors. *Cells* 2014; 3: 152-179.
- Massotte D. In vivo opioid receptor heteromerization: where do we stand? *Br J Pharmacol* 2014; doi: 10.1111/bph.12702.
- Wang HB, Zhao B, Zhong YQ, Li KC, Li ZY, Wang Q, et al. Coexpression of delta- and mu-opioid receptors in nociceptive sensory neurons. *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A* 2010; 107: 13117-13122.
- Rau KK, Caudle RM, Cooper BY, Johnson RD. Diverse immunocytochemical expression of opioid receptors in electrophysiologically defined cells of rat dorsal root ganglia. *J Chem Neuroanat* 2005; 29: 255-264.
- Bardoni R, Tawfik VL, Wang D, Francois A, Solorzano C, Shuster SA, et al. Delta opioid receptors presynaptically regulate cutaneous mechanosensory neuron input to the spinal cord dorsal horn. *Neuron* 2014; 81: 1312-1327.
- Gomes I, Gupta A, Filipovska J, Szeto HH, Pintar JE, Devi LA. A role for heterodimerization of mu and delta opiate receptors in enhancing morphine analgesia. *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A* 2004; 101: 5135-5139.
- Pedersen NP, Vaughan CW, Christie MJ. Opioid receptor modulation of GABAergic and serotonergic spinally projecting neurons of the rostral ventromedial medulla in mice. *J Neurophysiol* 2011; 106: 731-740.
- Kivell BM, Day DJ, McDonald FJ, Miller JH. Mu and delta opioid receptor immunoreactivity and mu receptor regulation in brainstem cells cultured from late fetal and early postnatal rats. *Brain Res Dev Brain Res* 2004; 149: 9-19.
- Gupta A, Mulder J, Gomes I, Rozenfeld R, Bushlin I, Ong E, et al. Increased abundance of opioid receptor heteromers after chronic morphine administration. *Sci Signal* 2010; 3: ra54.
- Erbs E, Faget L, Scherrer G, Matifas A, Filliol D, Vonesch J-L, et al. A mu-delta opioid receptor brain atlas reveals neuronal co-occurrence in subcortical networks. *Brain Structure and Function* 2014; DOI: 10.1007/s00429-014-0717-9.
- Scherrer G, Tryoen-Toth P, Filliol D, Matifas A, Laustriat D, Cao YQ, et al. Knockin mice expressing fluorescent delta-opioid receptors uncover G protein-coupled receptor dynamics in vivo. *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A* 2006; 103: 9691-9696.
- Duncan K, Ketzer N, Inati SJ, Davachi L. Evidence for area CA1 as a match/mismatch detector: a high-resolution fMRI study of the human hippocampus. *Hippocampus* 2012; 22: 389-398.

22. Wilson DA, Sullivan RM. Cortical processing of odor objects. *Neuron* 2011; 72: 506-519.
23. Moore JK. Organization of the human superior olivary complex. *Microsc Res Tech* 2000; 51: 403-412.
24. Mascaro MB, Prosdocimi FC, Bittencourt JC, Elias CF. Forebrain projections to brainstem nuclei involved in the control of mandibular movements in rats. *Eur J Oral Sci* 2009; 117: 676-684.
25. Hayes DJ, Northoff G. Identifying a network of brain regions involved in aversion-related processing: a cross-species translational investigation. *Front Integr Neurosci* 2011; 5:49.
26. Hayes DJ, Northoff G. Common brain activations for painful and non-painful aversive stimuli. *BMC Neurosci* 2012; 13: 60.
27. Shin JW, Geerling JC, Stein MK, Miller RL, Loewy AD. FoxP2 brainstem neurons project to sodium appetite regulatory sites. *J Chem Neuroanat* 2011; 42: 1-23.
28. Hamson DK, Watson NV. Regional brainstem expression of Fos associated with sexual behavior in male rats. *Brain Res* 2004; 1006: 233-240.
29. Komisaruk BR, Whipple B. Functional MRI of the brain during orgasm in women. *Annu Rev Sex Res* 2005; 16: 62-86.
30. van Rijn RM, Whistler JL. The delta(1) opioid receptor is a heterodimer that opposes the actions of the delta(2) receptor on alcohol intake. *Biol Psychiatry* 2009; 66: 777-784.
31. Gomes I, Fujita W, Gupta A, Saldanha SA, Negri A, Pinello CE, *et al.* Identification of a mu-delta opioid receptor heteromer-biased agonist with antinociceptive activity. *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A* 2013; 110: 12072-12077.
32. Aston-Jones G, Smith RJ, Moorman DE, Richardson KA. Role of lateral hypothalamic orexin neurons in reward processing and addiction. *Neuropharmacology* 2009; 56 (Suppl 1): 112-121.